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THE FICTION OF LEONARD MERRICK.

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

ANGLO-SAXON fiction, either in its English or in its American condition, is not so rich in form that one who feels its penury can pass any exception by, and not dread coming to actual want. A keen, perhaps a quivering, sense of this, was what made me, in my first acquaintance with the novels of Mr. Leonard Merrick, resolve to do my best to share with the public my pleasure in their singular shapeliness. Singular; for, when you have named Jane Austen, whom shall you name next for this excellence in the English condition of our fiction; or, in the American condition, when you have named Hawthorne, whom shall you name next? No doubt, a great many writers of short stories; but here it is a question of novels, and not of short stories. In these, it is rather difficult not to have form; in those, it is so difficult that I can think of no recent fictionist of his nation who can quite match with Mr. Merrick in that excellence. This will seem great praise, possibly too great, to the few who have a sense of such excellence; but it will probably be without real meaning to most, though our public might very well enjoy form if it could once be made to imagine it. In order to this end, we should have first to define what form was, but form is one of those elusive things which you can feel much better than you can say; to define it would be like defining charm in a woman, or poetry in a verse. Possibly, in order to enforce my point, I should have to bid the reader take almost any novel of Mr. Merrick's and read it; for then he would know what form is. Possibly, this is the conclusion to which I must come now, but I do not deny that this would be what is called "begging the question."

As to the world which this excellent form embodies, it may be said, first, that every writer of fiction creates the world where

his characters live. Of course, if he is an artist, it is vital to him to believe that he is representing the world in which he himself lives; and in a certain measure he is doing so, but he is always giving their habitat stricter limits than his own. One of the conditions of every art is that its created world must be a microcosm; even if it is not avowedly a fragment, the portrait it paints of life is a miniature where everything but the essentials are left out. If its effects are wisely meditated, it will sometimes show that the essentials are the little things and not the large things. The scene does not matter; the quality or station of the actors in it does not count; nothing matters or counts but the effect of reality. Before Ibsen became the immeasurable accomplished fact that he now is, many people supposed that his work was insignificant, because he depicted a provincial civilization. They wanted, in order to a sense of magnitude in what they saw, to have the scene pass in some great capital, and to have titled or fashionable figures in the action, so that they could be sure they were having their money's worth in the associations which have so long lent dignity to life in literature. In a small Norwegian town, with the company of Norwegian middle and lower class people, they felt that an indignity had been offered them. Why should they put on evening dress to go and see a thing of that kind, though it were touched to issues beyond Shakespeare? But now we hear nothing of the provinciality of Ibsen, because Ibsen is universally owned to be so great that nothing he dealt with can be accused of meanness, without fear in the accuser of being thought mean himself. It has come to no such pass yet with Mr. Merrick, however; and therefore any one may still say, without dread of such a consequence, that it is a very narrow world he deals with, and of events so few that it is wonderful how continually he provokes the reader's curiosity and holds his interest.

It is a world much remoter from Philistine sympathy than the Philistine world that Ibsen deals with; but, for the young and kind, or for the old and wise, it is a world which will always have a glamour, will be misted in an illusion such as wraps the persons whom its people are engaged in representing, either in the novel or in the theatre. In other terms, and I hope simpler terms, his story is commonly the story of obscure talent struggling to the light in those very uncertain avenues to distinction

and prosperity; and he contrives to vary it only by the different phases of their failure or success, which is always the same sort of failure and success. I do not know why the events should be of more appreciable human concern than comparable events in the lives of rising or falling painters, sculptors and architects, who should equally appeal in their like quality of artists. But it is certain that we somehow feel an enchantment in the career of the artists who create characters in books, or represent them on the boards, which we do not feel in the careers of those other artists. It may be that it is because we live longer with their creations or representations, and therefore are better acquaintance or closer friends with the creators. You cannot linger two or three days on the details of a picture or a statue or a building, as you can on those of a novel, or even three hours, as you can on those of a play, and you cannot know them so well that you long to know the author or actor, and attribute to him all sorts of personal interest, which perhaps experience would not realize. In any case, it is certain that, since fiction ceased to concern itself solely with kings and princes, or even with the nobility and gentry, it has found nothing of such sovereign effect with the reader as the aspirations and adventures of people, the younger the people the better, trying to get past the publisher or the manager into the light of the public square. These at present share the sort of pull which the pirate and the robber, the seducer and the seduced, the pickpocket and the pauper, the bankrupt, the rightful heir, the good and the bad trades-unionist, the muscular Christian, the burglar and the detective, all once enjoyed in turn, and now enjoy no longer, at least with the polite reader; and it ought to be fortunate for Mr. Leonard Merrick that his novels are mainly concerned with them in the hour of their supreme attractiveness. I have, of course, no belief that Mr. Merrick chose them because of their pull; it is much more probable that, in the strange way these things come about, he was chosen by them because of his personal acquaintance with their experiences. It cannot be any harm to cast upon a study of his fiction the light of the fact that he has himself been an actor and is an author, and it is scarcely impertinent to conjecture that the material of his fiction, out of which he has shaped its persons and events, is employed at first hand. A much more important fact is that he is always and instinctively artist enough

to employ it for the stuff it is, and that he has not attempted, so far as I can make out, to pass off any clay image of his fabric for a statue of pure gold, or even of gilded bronze. No squalor of that world of his is blinked, and we learn to trust him, not perhaps implicitly, for a faithful report of the world he knows so well, but implicitly enough, because he seems to have no question as to his function in regard to it. He is quite as honest as a Latin and a Slav would be in his place, and never as dishonest as another Anglo-Saxon might be.

Very probably his public would have been more regardful of him if he had been more regardful of his public; for, although his books have been from the first recognized for their mastery, they have not even yet, though he has been writing them ten or fifteen years, been any one of them a popular success. To be a popular success, a book must have successful people in it, and Mr. Merrick's books have either failures in them, or only the successes of heroes and heroines of conscience. Even the successes of these are not spectacular; they are slight, pale, doubtful triumphs, such as we see our own to be when we examine them by the light of our merit. They are pieces of good fortune, mercies, effects of what used to be called "the grace of God"; and that is not the sort of thing which the public buys novels for. It is true that they interest, and with such a grip of the heart as only makes them the more painful; but they are not always convincing with the mind. You ask yourself whether such a man or such a woman would have done so and so, though you have suffered with them to the event with a feeling of their reality which does not allow of a doubt as to the line of facts tending to the event. Would Heriot, in "*One Man's View*," have taken Mamie back after she had left him to live with another man? Would Cynthia, in "*A Daughter of the Philistines*," have forgiven her husband when he owned his unfaithfulness? Would Dr. Kennard, "*The Man who was Good*," have perceived something of greater force than the right to the love of Mary Brennan which his goodness had given him, when he saw the dying woman's instinctive joy in the sight of the man who had wronged her, but whom she loved?

Mr. Merrick might answer that the event would depend upon whether the love was real love or not. But what is real love? The brute lure or the human affection? He is not so much in the

bonds of superstition concerning passion as most novelists, and therefore he is not of the inferior novelists; he ranks himself with the great ones in that. He has the courage to own that certain veritable passions die long before those who have known them are dead. Apparently, he has seen this happen in the world among real men and women, and he portrays the fact as he has seen it happen. His fidelity cannot recommend him to the "world that loves a lover" so much that it will not allow that he can ever cease to be a lover; but it ought to make him friends with the few who love truth better even than lovers. At any rate, it is the event in several of his books, in perhaps the best of them, though sometimes he sacrifices to the false god also, and has lovers go on loving with a constancy which ought to have made him a wider public than I am afraid he has.

Of the two arch-enemies of love, prosperity and adversity, he makes an oftener study of adversity. There is a great deal of grim adversity in his books, which sometimes remains adversity to the end, but also sometimes puts off its frown. It is the more depressing when it becomes or remains the atmosphere of that ambition which seeks fruition in the successes of the theatre. If we are to believe him, and somehow Mr. Merrick mostly makes you believe him, the poor creatures, usually poor pretty creatures, who are trying to get upon the stage, are almost without number, and certainly outnumber the struggling journalists and authors a hundred to one. The spectacles of their humility and humiliation, of their meek endeavors and cruel defeats, are of such frequent recurrence in his novels and tales that, after a little knowledge of them, one approaches the scene with an expectation of heartache through which nothing short of the mastery dealing with them would support the reader. In the monotony of the event, it is most remarkable how he distinguishes and characterizes the different children of adversity, especially the daughters. They are commonly alike in their adversity, but they are individual in their way of experiencing it. In fact, in an age of intensely feminized fiction, he is one of the first of those who know how to catch the likenesses, to the last fleeting expression, of women; and especially of the women of the theatre. Probably, these are not essentially different from other women, but they have an evolution through their environment which no one else seems to have studied so surpassingly well. Sometimes they are good

women and sometimes they are bad, but they are so from a temperament differently affected by their errant and public life, their starved or surfeited vanity, their craze for change and variety, and they keep a simplicity, a singleness, in their selfishness and depravity, such as differences them from women bred amidst the artificialities of the world on the other side of the footlights. It would be easy to name a score of them from his pages, but it is sufficient to name Blanche Ellerton in the "Actor Manager" as a supreme type. Nature meant her for the theatre, but Mr. Merrick is also very successful with another sort of actress, equally gifted, but meant by temperament for the home as well as the theatre, like the heroine in "When Love Flies out of the Window." That is, perhaps, the more frequent type, perhaps because adversity, more or less marked, prevails in the lives of most actresses, rather than prosperity, and keeps them more normally women.

The charming woman who is primarily wife and mother is not less possible in the theatre than out of it, but out of it Mr. Merrick has hardly caught a truer likeness, or a lovelier, than Cynthia in "A Daughter of the Philistines." She is none the less lovely because she is so perfectly the creature of her environment, which it was not necessary that she share the vulgarity of her family in order to be of. She was probably as much mystified that her husband, after his first brilliant success of estimation, should have no other success as an author, as her father and mother were, but she could not vulgarly hold him responsible for it, or expect him to repeat it, because, no matter what her origin was, she was not vulgar, and they were. Secretly we feel that too much is put upon her when her husband is untrue to her, when he intrigues with the fashionable literary adventuress, and writes the stories under her name for which she salaries him; that part of the affair is altogether so unhandsome that Cynthia might have refused to forgive him with small grief to the fair-minded reader, and with rather more conviction than the actual ending of the story brings. We do not like to think it, but it seems to us that in Cynthia's forgiveness Mr. Merrick was playing to that indiscriminate populace which above all things desires a good ending.

The populace have a right to good endings, but not from everybody; they who love probability better have also their rights,

and it must be owned that Mr. Merrick, doubtless to his hurt, is usually more mindful of these. An excellent instance of his regard is the strange story called "Quaint Companions," which is the story of the absolutely vulgar and beautiful English girl who marries a black singer. The thing would be impossible in our conditions, but apparently not impossible in the English conditions, and at any rate you feel that it happened as the author says it did. On the woman's side it is a marriage for money, and on the man's for such love as a merely sensuous, merely artistic being of another race, an inferior race, can feel for a woman who is not only very beautiful, but is a beautiful white woman. He is a very great artist; you are made to feel that so distinctly that, when you are told of his singing, you can almost hear him sing. He has also a clear intelligence concerning himself and his love for her, but the heart of his personal, and perhaps his ethnical, mystery is imparted in the brief aside which tells us that all his life he has never denied himself, though most things in life, which other men prize, have been denied him. To have the best of them now, in the possession of a beautiful white woman for his wife, he is willing to be her dog, her slave, and in her vulgar shame she is willing to make him so. The situation is not less than tremendously realized, but in the reader it requires something of the author's courage to realize it. The secondary situation evolves itself after the singer's death, when his widow is left, not so rich as she had lived, with her white son by her first marriage and her mulatto son by her second, adoring the first and coldly enduring the second. The mulatto turns out a poet of real gift, and his tragedy is to fall in love by letter and by picture with a beautiful white girl. But the picture is that of the sister of the girl who writes to him, and who is a little deformed painter. They meet and forgive each other, and so far the story, which has gone so ill, ends well.

The sensitive reader feels the mechanism in the conclusion, but there is no perceptible mechanism in the story of "The Actor Manager," which is the best of Mr. Merrick's stories, so far as I know them. At all moments of it you feel that it happened, and that the people in it are alive, with a life of human probabilities beyond it. I can recall no English novel in which the study of temperament and character is carried farther or deeper, allowing for what the people are, and there is not a false

or mistaken line or color in it. For anything to equal it, we must go to the Slavs, in such triumphs of their naturalness as Tourguénief's "Smoke," or the society passage of Tolstoy's "War and Peace." The French stories are conventional and mechanical in their naturalism beside it; perhaps a Spaniard like Galdós has done work of equal fineness. It is not alone in Oliphant Royce, with the stress of his hereditary conscience, or in Blanche Ellerton, depraved both by her artistry and by her ambition, that the author convinces; Otho Fairbairn, who becomes the "scoundrel" whom Blanche not less deliberately than hysterically makes him for his money, and Alma King, who is as good an artist as Blanche and yet a good woman, and Blanche's mother whose sentimental novelettes support her contemptuous husband in the production of his real but unsalable masterpieces, and Blanche's plain sister with her famine for a little love, a little admiration from men, are all in their several ways wonderfully lifelike. The theatre itself, which began as a theatre of art, and ended as a theatre of profit, has almost a human appeal in its tragedy, as if it were a sentient organism, with a heart to be broken and a soul to be lost. Nobody who is not inevitably bad is very bad; the world is the world in which we live.

Why, then, is not this masterly novelist a master universally recognized and accepted? That is something I have asked myself more than once, especially in reading the criticisms of his several books, not one of which has lacked the praise of a critic qualified to carry conviction of its merit. Perhaps the secret is that the stories are almost always very unhappy. There is no consolation in their tragedy; they do not even "raise a noble terror," such as was once the supposed business of tragedy. Upon the whole, they leave you feeling mean, feeling retroactively capable of the shabby things which have been done in them. Another secret may be that, when the poverty which haunts them is relieved in this case or that, you are left with the sense of the vast poverty still remaining in the world. If a struggler is given a chance to get his breath, the great struggle of life goes on. Yet another secret may be that there is no fine world, no great world, in the books; we scarcely recall a person of title in any of them, and people who like to associate with rich or noble persons, when they are "taken out of themselves," have not so much as the company of one high-born villain, or corrupt *grande dame*. Apparently,

the glamour of the theatre, of authorship, though undeniable, is not potent enough for the general public. Yet it seems a pity for the general public that it should not read Mr. Merrick's novels; for, though the honest reviewer would wish to guard the younger reader from knowledge of some of their facts, he would, in proportion to his honesty, wish to affirm the conscience with which the evil of these facts is moralized by their rarely faltering art.

W. D. HOWELLS.